OLD TESTAMENT CRITICISM AND THE PULPIT

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The question whether or not critical studies tend to make preaching effective might well be discussed on the basis of the excellent book published nearly two years ago by Professor McFadyen, entitled *Old Testament Criticism and the Christian Church.* It is a pity that all discussions of the subject cannot be conducted in the irenic spirit of this book. Humor may have some place in serious argument, but ridicule and abuse can only cloud the issues. Nothing can be more unfortunate than the spectacle of Christian teachers accusing one another of dishonesty, and sneering at one another's puerility and ignorance. This is not said as a plea for mercy from the side that has been beaten in the war of wits. The brilliant satire of Wellhausen is at least equal to the ridicule of the author of *Daniel in the Critics' Den.* But neither has aided the cause of truth, nor led the people who look for guidance to a more reverent attitude toward the sacred Scriptures.

Of course higher criticism as such must not be obtruded into the pulpit. Indeed, as McFadyen well points out, the very name is unfortunate. With all its literary propriety, it can never be dissociated from seeming arrogance and hostility. To be sure, as he shows conclusively, all present-day students are really critics. The process by which Professor Green defended the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was exactly the same critical process as that by which other scholars have attempted to prove its composite authorship. Yet the term "critic" has come to be a party name, and as such is unfortunate.

The question that is involved is really one of historical and literary method. Are the Scriptures to be treated as literature? Is the history of the Hebrews to be treated as history? Professor McFadyen insists most clearly that these questions must be answered in the affirmative. And he shows further that the employment

of these methods of study is not new. They go back to the ablest exegete in the early church. Luther freely employed them. And their essential application to the questions of authorship and historicity was laid down one hundred and fifty years ago. Criticism is not a brand-new invention of German rationalism. Criticism is investigation. And investigation is of the essence of Protestantism. We have not given up the authority of popes and councils to accept that of Jewish rabbis, ancient superscriptions, and traditional interpretations. The honest student must be a critic. The preacher who uses the Old Testament as anything but a book of texts must be a critic. As soon as he asks himself what a statement of priest or prophet or sage means, or asks himself how any incident or story is to be understood, he is a higher critic.

The opponent of criticism will, of course, admit that the student must ask himself these questions, but he will add that it must be with due regard for the authority of Christ and Scripture. Professor McFadyen has gone to the root of the difference between the opposing schools of thought in discussing the relation of criticism to Christ, to the supernatural, and to inspiration. There can be no doubt that many who would welcome the historical and literary study of the Old Testament are fearful that it means the lessening of the authority of Christ, the elimination of the supernatural character of the history and literature, and thus the virtual denial of inspiration.

Nothing can be more important than a frank and reverent treatment of these questions. No preaching can be effective which ignores their importance. It is characteristic of the charm and helpfulness of this very Christian book that the author discusses these matters sympathetically and fairly, fully appreciating the views of those whom he opposes, yet distinctly proving that the conflict is not of essence, but of definitions. The reverent critical student finds that Christ taught absolutely nothing about Old Testament authorship and history. He used the Old Testament as a great religious revelation. He has not said a word to bind the course of free inquiry with regard to matters which could never have been considered in his day.

The critical student discovers, further, that the history and literature of the Hebrews manifest throughout, in the most remarkable

manner, the presence and power of God. He will, of course, study any given miraculous narrative without prepossession for or against its unusual character. And even when he decides that the waters rising as a wall on each side of the children of Israel, and the sun standing still in the heavens at the prayer of Joshua, are prosaic interpretations of poetic descriptions, he will still recognize the mighty presence and leadership of Jehovah in the exodus from Egypt and in the conquest of the Promised Land. As McFadyen has so well pointed out, it is just the student who most carefully relates the history and literature of Israel to the contemporary Semitic environment who discovers their unique character. And so he quotes Professor Sanday: "My experience is that criticism leads straight up to the supernatural, and not away from it."

With regard to inspiration, it is not likely that the critical student, after careful study of the facts, will define it as such an influence of the divine Spirit upon the biblical writers that they always expressed exactly the mind of God for all people and for all time, without any single, slightest, historical, geographical, or scientific inaccuracy. He will know that such a definition is theological and not biblical. His search will reveal to him that the Bible nowhere makes such a claim for itself. But the more carefully he comes to know the Old Testament writers, the more certain will he be that they speak from God, as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, and he will realize that the Old Testament is the word of God.

The result of critical Old Testament study for the preacher is inevitably that he finds a wealth of material that is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness." To use Mr. McFadyen's word, criticism has recovered the humanity of the Bible, while preserving its divinity. And as the recovery of the humanity of Christ has stimulated, enriched, and humanized preaching, while his glorious divine character has only shone out the more clearly, so the realization of the humanness of these old writings, where priests taught, and prophets preached, and sages thought, and psalmists prayed, makes them reasonable and stirring, while their great divine character remains their vital power.

Critical study makes for effective preaching by making the old Scripture real. Every schoolboy who has read Demosthenes has

been stirred with admiration for the patriot orator and has realized anew the value of liberty. How few preachers have ever made the same study of Isaiah and found in him a greater patriot orator than the Athenian! Who can study the first Book of Maccabees, and then, turning to Daniel, read the stories and visions as "tracts for the times," without living back in that age of heroism and thanking God for the heritage of truth that has come down through the heroes of the faith? To quote another of McFadyen's phrases, critical study makes a man a "citizen of the past." The hypothetical young man of the magazines, who does not go to church because there is too much "old Jerusalem" in the sermon, would be likely to be interested if the historical imagination of the preacher could make him live back in old Jerusalem, and realize that men then were tempted in all points like as he is, while prophets in marvelously modern language spoke the message of the righteousness of God.

The objection is often urged against critical study that it results in the obtrusion of the processes of the workshop into the pulpit. Rather the opposite is the fact. Only critical study can save us from such obtrusion. Who has not heard sermons on Abraham in which it was necessary for the preacher to show that climatic conditions in Syria are so preservative of female beauty that Sarah at sixty-five years of age would have been an object of great attraction to the Pharaoh? The first chapter of Genesis may be the subject of a noble sermon on God the Creator, but only if a man is able to free himself from the necessity of proving that it is an exact anticipation of modern scientific discovery. The Book of Jonah may be presented in its magnificent meaning as the missionary book of the Old Testament, teaching the universal love of God; but if the preacher be not a critical student, he will scarcely refrain from making the whale, perhaps with many infallible proofs from other whales, the outstanding idea of his sermon.

In preaching, the critical process need not be exhibited. It may be assumed. It would be insufferable pedantry to bring Deutero-Isaiah into the pulpit, but who can read George Adam Smith's exposition of the fortieth chapter of Isaiah without feeling that he must preach on "The Climax in the Commonplace" from the standpoint of the exile prophet in Babylon? The preacher will not refer

to the third chapter of Genesis as a myth; but he will avoid all attempt at historical detail. He will not concern himself with the pristine attitude of the serpent, or with the possibility of animal speech; he will present the temptation and the transgression as a picture of a universal human experience, which hearers old and young will understand, for they all have eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The great lesson of that old story, so true that every conscience attests it, will make its own effective appeal. So again the preacher who is presenting the solemn lesson of the failure of the first king of Israel will not be obliged to discuss the critical problems connected with the rupture between Samuel and Saul. The old reasons for the divine determination to exterminate Amalek need neither be advanced nor controverted. The critical process may be assumed, and the fundamental truth that Saul was a man to whom petty political expediency was more than the national religious ideals may be presented with all its evident application to the conditions of today.

On the other hand, sometimes the critical process itself may be clearly used in preaching with admirable results. If the greatest piece of literature in the Old Testament—the Book of Job—is ever to be used in the pulpit, it must be frankly treated as a piece of literature. It does not teach the satanic agency in calamity, nor the inevitableness of human sorrow, nor the punishment of a self-righteous man. It teaches the mystery of evil and the mystery of good, suggests some meaning for the sorrow of the world, and reveals God over all, whom it is safe to trust.

An interesting illustration of the homiletic possibilities of criticism is afforded by the dual narratives of the introduction of David to King Saul. In one case he is represented as the young hero of Judah, who may soothe the king and lead his army. In the other story he is the shepherd lad, who in dependence on Jehovah, slays the giant with his mere sling. What are these two traditions that lived in Israel but the two ways in which every effort may be regarded? The one story delighted to remember the skill and prowess of the man whom Jehovah chose because he was the fittest to be the great king. The other story dwelt on the divine power making use of a consecrated human instrument. Both are true. They are the

two hemispheres of truth: "work out your own salvation . . . . for it is God that worketh in you." Here is a biblical narrative saved from painful harmonization, and used to yield its own rich double lesson.

Even so august a passage as the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, into which one would never intrude in a sermon the questions of date and authorship, may be made luminous by the simple critical process of reading the Hebrew tenses with consistency, thus getting the picture of the contrite Jew looking back upon the strangely misunderstood Servant of Jehovah: "He grew up before him as a tender plant . . . . he had no form nor comeliness . . . . surely he bore our griefs . . . . all we like sheep had gone astray, we had turned every one to his own way, and Jehovah laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Another manner in which critical study of the Old Testament makes for effective preaching is that it opens up portions of Scripture which are otherwise very difficult to use. Such a story as that of Samson is full of suggestiveness, but the preacher must explicitly make allowance for the rough days in which this hero of Dan performed his exploits, and the genial exaggeration which such heroic stories naturally undergo as they pass from mouth to mouth must be recognized. Then what a sermon the five stages of Samson present! There is the sacredness of childhood, the strength of manhood, the self-indulgence of the flesh, the slavery of habit, the salvation of the penitent. Of course, this last is expressed in a rude vengeance and an impossible catastrophe, but the divine grace coming back to the enslaved sinner is wonderfully impressive. Criticism does not weaken such a story, but by the very fact of making it one of the folk-tales of Israel places it where its beautiful rugged truth becomes clear. So of many an Old Testament story, which may not be the theme of a sermon, but may afford noble illustration of truth. If the fall of Jericho be treated as a splendid picture of the fall of evil before God's consecrated hosts, and the story of the three in the furnace as a promise that no earthly power can overcome spiritual truth, and the vision of the angelic hosts at Dothan as a divine revelation that truth is guarded by omnipotence, these narratives, instead of being the cause of skepticism and a fruitful opportunity for controversy, will shine as the illustrations of spiritual verities.

Before the critical view of the Bible the old-time weapons of infidelity disappear. The sting is completely drawn from the waspish attacks on Christianity which young men used to read so widely. The Old Testament takes its place as the wonderful literature of God's people, in which myth, legend, tradition, story, history, sermon, oration, vision, legislation, prayer, poem, lyric, epic, and dramatic all have their part and their message. And from this treasure-house the preacher, with wise discrimination, brings forth treasures new and old.

JEREMIAH

—*Michelangelo*